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ABSTRACT

It is critical for schools and districts engaged in a comprehensive school-reform process to develop a schoolwide or districtwide strategy, one that affects teaching and learning, governance, and professional development. Researchers studying school-reform processes have noted that different types of models suit different schools differently. Process models, for example, focus more on the processes used in the school, such as how teachers interact. Content, or prescriptive, models might come with a specific curriculum and plan for what teaching and learning in the school will look like. Even more critical than the type of school-reform model is the fit between each individual model and the needs and abilities of the school. Planners need to be aware of the needs of the school, the existing skills and strengths of the school staff, the level of urgency for undertaking reform, and the types of goals the school wants to achieve. Researchers' experiences in schools clearly indicate that staff and leadership buy-in is also a critical factor for success. To plan effectively, some schools, districts, and models allow for a "zero year," that is, a year to plan, assess needs, and make good decisions. (RT)

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Research Brief

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Choosing a Model and Types of Models: How to Find What Works for Your School

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Questions Addressed in This Brief:

- *What are the types of models and how are they different?*
- *What should I look for in a model?*
- *What process should I use to choose a model?*

Introduction

It is critical for schools and districts engaged in a comprehensive school reform process to develop a schoolwide or districtwide strategy, one that affects teaching and learning, governance, and professional development. Many schools and districts seek external assistance from school reform models as part of their comprehensive plan.

Across the country, dozens of researchers are spending time in scores of schools that are engaging in comprehensive school reform. They have a front-row seat to what's already happening in schools that are implementing school reform models. As a result, they have much to say about the critical importance of the process involved in selecting a model and developing a comprehensive plan.

Types of Models

Different types of models suit different schools differently. Some models, often referred to as process models, focus more on the processes used in the school, such as how teachers interact, but are not prescriptive about what should go on in a school and do not offer a specific curriculum. As Rebecca Herman of the American Institutes for Research explained, the model developer is in a position to say, "Here's an idea. We want to work with you to operationalize it, and your school will look different from any other school that uses this idea."

Other models, often referred to as content models or prescriptive models, might come with a specific curriculum and plan for what teaching and learning in the school should and will look like. Herman explained that this is more a matter of "this is what you're going to do in your classroom, and we're going to train you to do it." This is not the only way to categorize models, but looking at these categories can help schools think about what they need. These two extremes are the ends of a continuum of model approaches.

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• What the Model Looks Like in a School

More prescriptive models are designed for the school to emulate as closely as possible. In contrast, process models are suited for adaptation within the school and will not, almost by definition, look the same in different schools. A content or prescriptive model is much more likely to look similar from school to school.

• Ease of Implementation

Prescriptive models may be easier to put into practice in the short term. This is largely due to the fact that they are more "ready to go" once teachers are trained. Process models tend to require a period of input and/or reflection on the part of the school leadership and staff, and thus can take more time to be effectively put into practice and to yield results in student achievement.

The Importance of Fit

Even more critical than the type of school reform model is the fit between each individual model and the needs and abilities of the school. Sam Stringfield of Johns Hopkins University used a medical metaphor to explain: "Penicillin is a wonderful drug, but you don't take penicillin if you have a headache, and chemotherapy is a wonderful drug, but you don't take chemotherapy if you have influenza...in the end it's not going to matter if America's Choice is better than Success for All or Direct Instruction. That's like saying that chemotherapy is better than aspirin."

For schools, this means being aware of three key things:

1) the needs of the school
2) the existing skills and strengths of the school staff
3) the level of urgency for undertaking reform

For example, when asked what initial questions she would pose to a school seeking a comprehensive school reform model, Cheryl Kane of the U.S. Department of Education replied, "I'd ask you what your needs are. I'd ask you how well your teachers are educated and whether or not they can teach reading."

It is also important to be aware of the level of urgency in engaging the school in reform. As Katherine Blasik from Florida's Broward County School District explains, "given the right leadership and readiness a process model might be better in the long run, but with some schools, they need to just get in there with something prescriptive and do something about reading right away; they can't afford to spend a year working on their needs assessment."

NETWORK OF RESEARCHERS

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Mary Hess of the National Opinion Research Center agreed, noting that "a good portion of schools are beginning to realize they've made a mistake with their selections, that rather than professional development about teaming, they really need a model with curriculum, someone to come in and teach them how to teach reading, rather than teaching them how to collaborate."

Sam Stringfield added, "I think the fact that schools are making choices that matter is a wonderfully healthy thing. It's very unfortunate that some have to learn the choice they made mattered by finally realizing they are stuck with something that's not a good match."

Another important factor in finding the right fit is the types of goals the school wants to achieve. Susan Fuhrman of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE) and the University of Pennsylvania said, "What do you mean by student achievement? Models may measure student achievement by different criteria and be satisfied." If you look at an example of a process model that requires students to do exhibitions, for example, "the model will say the kids are learning, but they don't necessarily do that well on standardized tests." So, schools will need to think about "How is accountability defined? How is student achievement defined?"

The Decision Process

Even the process by which a school makes a decision about a model is hard to get right. Sheila Rosenblum of Brigham Rosenblum Associates painted a picture of schools that would "go through a long process to diagnose their own needs, their own concerns, and then the possible models or innovations were shown to them, and invariably, they picked the innovation they heard was working down the street or in a nearby district. In other words, even with all the assistance they received in the process, they didn't necessarily pick what suited them."

• The Zero Year — Planning Ahead

To plan effectively, some schools, districts, and models allow for what is often called a "zero year" — a year to plan, assess needs, and make good decisions.

Strategies used in the zero year include taking a close look at the school's disaggregated student achievement data and looking for gaps, investigating different school reform models, and thinking about the strengths and weaknesses of the school's staff and programs.

• The Bottom Line

Steve Ross described his experiences studying schools in Memphis, Tennessee: "For every model, there was a successful school and an unsuccessful school, and some of those were a half-mile away, receiving the same professional development and the same resources. One took off and the other didn't, and the reason one took off is because they wanted to do it."

Researchers' experiences in schools clearly indicate that staff and leadership buy-in is critical for success. It's important to note, though, that there are many other critical factors. As Ross added, "I think wanting to change is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition."

References

Step by Step, part of the NCCSR website, collects some of the best of these tools and resources in one place. http://www.goodschools.gwu.edu/sbs/

Making Good Choices, NCREL. Beginning on page 29 of this tool are appendices C through F, which help schools select an externally developed comprehensive reform model that fits school needs.
http://www.ncrel.org/csri/tools/makegood.pdf

The Catalog of School Reform Models lists over 50 models that have been reviewed against rigorous criteria.
http://www.nwrel.org/scpd/catalog/index.shtml

Conclusion

According to researchers, there are a variety of lessons that can be considered when searching for the right school reform model or plan.

- Know your needs and the needs of the schools you are working with.
- Take advantage of the decision making processes available and be sure that you're choosing a model or plan that will work for your school.
- Be aware of staff buy-in — Don't undertake a reform if it's clear the school staff and leadership will not support it.
- Consider taking a "zero year" — some extra time to plan out the school's needs. At the same time, be aware of the level of urgency in the school for change.

This brief is the product of conversations over a two day period with the Network of Researchers, the principal investigators of CSR studies. This group met October 25 — 26, 2001, in Washington, D.C.

About NCCSR

The National Clearinghouse for Comprehensive School Reform (NCCSR) collects and disseminates information that builds the capacity of schools to raise the academic achievement of all students. This is accomplished by continuously examining the literature related to CSR, adding high quality materials to the databases and actively sending useful information to educators and policy makers at the local, state, and national levels. Through its web site, reference and retrieval services, and publications, NCCSR is the central gateway to information on CSR.

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